

Alliance Theatre Artist Talk Transcript – Boy Who Kissed the Sky

Assata Amankeechi: Welcome to the Alliance Theater Artist Talk, an Alliance Theater podcast series. I am Assata Amankeechi, the Spelman Leadership Fellow, introducing you to a riveting conversation between Divinity Roxx and Eugene H. Russell IV, a conversation on artistry, collaboration, and their work on *The Boy Who Kissed the Sky*.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Divinity Roxx.

Divinity Roxx: Yo.

Eugene H. Russell IV: What's happening?

Divinity Roxx: Chill, man. How you feeling?

Eugene H. Russell IV: Making the art.

Divinity Roxx: Eugene Russell, the fourth. H. Russell, the fourth. Come on, don't forget the H.

Eugene H. Russell IV: That's it.

Divinity Roxx: Listen.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Making the art.

Divinity Roxx: Always making the art. I was thinking about this, both of us being from Atlanta and how special it has been to compose music for a play that is on the Coca-Cola stage at the alliance, at the Pulitzer Prize Winning Alliance.

Eugene H. Russell IV: The Tony Award.

Divinity Roxx: The Tony Award. That's what it is. The Tony Award winning...

Eugene H. Russell IV: Alliance Theater.

Divinity Roxx: Alliance Theater. How cool is that?

Eugene H. Russell IV: That's a big deal because I mean, with it being a TYA show sometimes, you don't know which stage it might be on. I don't know how to decide that. But when I found out it was going to be on the main stage, I was like, "That's like a cherry on top."

Divinity Roxx: It was.

Eugene H. Russell IV: I was happy with it just being here, period, but I was like, "On the main stage?"

Divinity Roxx: Yeah, that's pretty cool. I saw a tweet from Atlanta Public Schools. They had given all the students a ticket and that's when it really...

Eugene H. Russell IV: That's a great initiative.

Divinity Roxx: ... Hit home. Because I remember going to the symphony or to see a play at the Woodruff Arts Center, getting on the bus with the little sack lunch.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Sitting before the show starts. Yeah. You know what I mean? Great. I'm out of school.

Divinity Roxx: Exactly. It's like the field trip.

Eugene H. Russell IV: What's going down? Oh, man. What's about to happen?

Divinity Roxx: The whole process. Getting the permission slip signed. O.

Eugene H. Russell IV: H, yeah. Absolutely. The feeling going to school that day knowing you were going on the field trip. Sitting on the bus. You know what I'm saying?

Divinity Roxx: Did you ever imagine that you would become an artist when you were that little kid sitting in the theater?

Eugene H. Russell IV: Oh, man.

Divinity Roxx: Were you an artist then? Were you playing music?

Eugene H. Russell IV: I've been playing saxophone since fifth grade. I was the kid in the band that took it way too seriously, probably.

Divinity Roxx: Me too.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Yelling at everybody else. They laughing because we were messing up. I was like, "That ain't funny, y'all. We sound bad."

Divinity Roxx: Bro, I used to take my clarinet home.

Eugene H. Russell IV: I was just about to ask, clarinet. Okay.

Divinity Roxx: Played the clarinet. Used to take it home with my sheet music, set it up in my bedroom and practice.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Can you remember if you were like first chair, second chair?

Divinity Roxx: Oh, yeah. I was first chair, clarinet in sixth grade.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Yeah. Yeah, I was first chair at saxophone until I got to high school and there was a cat that could really play. I was a close second chair and then he decided to play football and I took over first chair. I don't think he got much playing time either. I was like, "You should stayed in the band, dude." It was like, "Your loss."

Divinity Roxx: That is crazy.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Did anybody in your life tell you, or did you feel that there was something kind of special about your insistence upon getting the music right even at that age? Could you make anything of it? Did something feel a little different about it to you?

Divinity Roxx: No, it's just who I was. I think growing up in a city like Atlanta, my mother had this work ethic and she wanted us to be excellent. She wanted us to have a better life than she did. My mom used to call me her star child when I was really little. And so I guess I just fell into that at a very young age. And I loved music. You know that love, that pure love for music, and then the idea that you get to play it. It's like, "Wow, I can do that, too?"

Eugene H. Russell IV: And the liberation it comes with, I don't need permission to write my own songs.

Divinity Roxx: Oh, yeah. Later on when you start doing it.

Eugene H. Russell IV: I can write my own stuff and write about what I... Well, maybe not literally about whatever I wanted to write about 'cause my mama would get a hold of it.

Divinity Roxx: That's true.

Eugene H. Russell IV: But for the most part, right? I can write a whole song?

Divinity Roxx: I can always tell when somebody's played on a team or when somebody's played an individual sport, they grew up playing an individual sport.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Does it play out artistically or just in general?

Divinity Roxx: Absolutely. No, artistically, when you're in an artistic environment collaborating with people, you have to be able to work as a team. And that means that the project, the team, the goal comes before the individual.

Eugene H. Russell IV: That's right.

Divinity Roxx: You learn very early on. There is no I in team. There is me in team. Kobe used to say, "But there is a me in there." There's no I. So, you learn early on how to fight for your teammates and push your teammates and encourage them.

Eugene H. Russell IV: That makes total sense to me. There's some kind of athlete's edge and drive.

Divinity Roxx: Oh, absolutely.

Eugene H. Russell IV: You work together. Which I love it. There's just something that's... And it's not a competing against me thing, but there's this drive to win. You know what I'm saying? And not like individual win. I'm saying a drive for us to win.

Divinity Roxx: Oh, this project is going to be amazing. Absolutely.

Eugene H. Russell IV: You know what I'm saying? Yeah. And it's like, "Yo, I'm glad we're on the same team." And it's one of those things, it's like, "Yo, I wouldn't want to have to go against you. I'm glad we're on the same team."

Divinity Roxx: Oh, that's awesome. Did you play teams? So, you played team sports?

Eugene H. Russell IV: I did. So, I loved baseball. I played a lot of baseball. I was pretty good too. Actually, I was shortstop and second baseman. My best season, only struck out once the whole year I was lead off hitter.

Divinity Roxx: Oh, wow.

Eugene H. Russell IV: 'Cause I was so short they couldn't find my strike zone, was a lot of walks.

Divinity Roxx: I love it.

Eugene H. Russell IV: I was fast. I was good defensive player. Not much power. I was a contact hitter. You know what I'm saying? I played baseball and I did a couple of individual sports in high school. I wrestled, which is, I know a lot of people are like, "You wrestle?" I was like, "Cool out. They had different weight classes." I wrestled in a lower weight class. And then I played tennis too. But the team sport that I remember the most is just baseball, man. I loved the camaraderie sitting in that dugout. You know what I mean? We come up with all the kind of mean chants for other teams.

Divinity Roxx: Exactly. We used to do that, too.

Eugene H. Russell IV: The other teams would be like, "Don't say that. That's not very nice." It was like, "We didn't really mean it." Pitcher got all like a washing machine [inaudible].

Divinity Roxx: Exactly.

Eugene H. Russell IV: That's not nice.

Divinity Roxx: That's too funny.

Eugene H. Russell IV: So, that was my joy. Softball, what else did you play?

Divinity Roxx: I played basketball.

Eugene H. Russell IV: I could totally see that too.

Divinity Roxx: And then I played track, but only because coach made us play track in the off season so we would stay fit.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Did you do all those through high school?

Divinity Roxx: Yes. So, first of all, I'd like to say thank you again for bringing me into this project.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Thank you for agreeing to come on the project.

Divinity Roxx: So, tell me a little bit about that whole thing. How did that even come about? I remember when you called me and was like, "Yo, there's a project that I want..."

Eugene H. Russell IV: Yeah, yeah. You immediately came to mind. Composing music for an alliance show called Beautiful Blackbird, some years ago. Chris Moses extended the invite for me to be composer on that. And I was like, "You sure? I ain't really composed for theaters." He was like, "Yeah, do what you do." I said, "Cool, I'm going to do what I do."

So, fast-forward few projects later, there were a couple pandemic projects that were going to be stage shows that became animated shorts, so few projects later, and Chris was like, "Okay, we got to get you writing some more." So, he said, "Man, we're working on this show loosely based on the childhood of Jimi Hendrix." He was like, "And I'd love for you to write for, it's going to be a co-pro between the Alliance and Seattle Children's Theater." I was like, "Say less, I'm in." And he was like, "It would be good if we could think of a woman to have on the team." And I was like, "Say no more." Immediately I was like, "Divinity." Because I remember from our hanging out in our twenties when we were hitting the scene, I remember that you absolutely had a background... I didn't even call it background. I absolutely remembered that part of your musical roots wearing rock.

Divinity Roxx: Yeah.

Eugene H. Russell IV: You know what I'm saying?

Divinity Roxx: For sure.

Eugene H. Russell IV: So, I always remembered that. And then I was like, "Man, it's going to be a little hip hop." It was just a no-brainer. And so then I reached out and...

Divinity Roxx: I was like, "Yeah!"

Eugene H. Russell IV: You didn't really need to think. I was like, "Cool," and you had something popping then.

Divinity Roxx: What was I doing?

Eugene H. Russell IV: That I didn't know, you were working on your children...

Divinity Roxx: Oh, my kids' album, yeah.

Eugene H. Russell IV: I didn't even know that when I reached out to you.

Divinity Roxx: Yeah. Work started...

Eugene H. Russell IV: I remember you saying this is perfect timing.

Divinity Roxx: It was perfect timing. That is so true. Yes. I had opportunity to write some kids' music during the pandemic and it really started to blow up. I had two books published by Scholastic based on my songs, kids' songs. And when you hit me up and was like, "Hey, I'm doing this show for kids called The Boy Who Kissed the Sky, Jimi Hendrix." And I was like, "Yo, that sounds super dope." And you sent me the Beautiful Blackbird music, which it was incredible.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Thank you.

Divinity Roxx: And it was funny because it reminded me of when we were in our twenties running around Atlanta, playing at all the jam sessions. You jumping in my big old truck and we're riding around, rolling every night and you hit me up and was like... Because you were always in the theater and you were like, "Yo, so I got this play, this theater Push Push hired me to compose music for him and do sound design." [inaudible] You were like, "Yo, we should collaborate on it." I'm like, "Okay."

Eugene H. Russell IV: Like 30, 40 something.

Divinity Roxx: So, you were like, "Yeah, we got to do 30 songs and it's due tomorrow."

Eugene H. Russell IV: Yo. And we pumped it out.

Divinity Roxx: We pumped it out. Yo, it was so crazy.

Eugene H. Russell IV: And speaking of, so I'm trying to remember. It's been not a long process from like, "Oh, it's a drag," but it seems like we've been working on the Boy Who Kissed the Sky for a long time, right? So, there was so many stages. Help me remember, did we start working remotely before the first workshop?

Divinity Roxx: No.

Eugene H. Russell IV: We didn't work remotely at all. Did we?

Divinity Roxx: No. We talked about it and then it was like it happened.

Eugene H. Russell IV: We both were so busy, too [inaudible].

Divinity Roxx: Oh, we were so busy. It was like, "I'll see you in Seattle." And we got there and this was my first time doing anything for theater. And I didn't know what the process was. I didn't know the lingo, I didn't know the process. And we come into this room and it's like, "Okay, make music." I was like, "Yo, this how we do it? There's a workshop happening tomorrow and today we're supposed to come up with music for the start of this workshop that happens tomorrow."

Eugene H. Russell IV: That's what was so cool. What was so cool to meet over, Divinity, right? Because you have traveled the world. You've been on that scene. That's what was so cool to me, I was like, "This is really exciting. This is kind of a new thing for Divinity as much as Divinity has experienced and been out there playing," I was like, "I was able to bring her in on something kind of new for her." I mean, you are a performer, so the performance part of it ain't new for you, but this process of composing for theater...

And I thought it was really cool because you were so good about not hesitating to bring your creativity and everything into it, yet you also were picking my brain because you have such a respect for whatever arena you're in. I think that's what it stems from. You were like, "Okay, cool. I've been playing with a little bit of everybody, a little bit of everywhere, but some of this element is new to me." I remember you picking my brain about some things.

Divinity Roxx: Yeah. It's so exciting, dude. First of all, I say yes to everything. So when you said, "Do you want to do this?" Listen, I love jumping into new adventures, especially new creative

ventures because I just feel like as an artist, we are here to expand and grow. And if we continue to do the same thing we've always done, we're never going to grow.

So, this was so exciting, and I got to work with you and you've been doing this forever, and I remember how much fun we had when we were kids.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Divinity Roxx: So, it was like, "Okay, come in the room and create." Then so we got the script. We're reading it.

Eugene H. Russell IV: We rekindled our friendship like that.

Divinity Roxx: Oh, absolutely.

Eugene H. Russell IV: That was so cool.

Divinity Roxx: It was great. It was like, "Here's the intro, here's the opening."

Eugene H. Russell IV: Yep, yep.

Divinity Roxx: Okay. Boom. I pick up the bass and I'm just playing.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Yep, yep. But that's exactly why I thought it'd be right. Because for me, I'm not big on recycling the same sort of ideas. You know what I'm saying? We got to move it forward. So, if it means bringing in some folks who are freaking brilliant, but just haven't done a lot of stuff in the arena of theater, cool. Let's bring their brilliance into this arena and see what we come up with.

For me, it's always the show is now. The show ain't late, the show is right now. You know what I mean? Now, that doesn't mean if you got a long rehearsal day, you go a hundred percent full out every moment. But as far as your focus, as far as your intent, the show is now. It's like, "What do you mean fix it later?"

Divinity Roxx: No, we're not fixing it later.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Right now. This is the show. This is the show. Yeah. And I think, speaking of, as we've been in the studio getting this cast recording together, that's one thing I liked about our drive. You know what I'm saying? It's like, "Nah, let's get it right. Let's do it again."

Divinity Roxx: Well, even when we were writing, even going back to that process, writing the songs and feeling like, "Okay, this is cool, but is it okay that it is cool, or do we want it to be great?"

Eugene H. Russell IV: You were good with shaking stuff up with that because I was like, "Oh, man, this feels great." You were like, "Well, it could feel better." And I'd go, "No, but it already feels great." And so then I remembered it's like, "Okay, what would've hurt?" Because you say it sometimes, you're like, "What would it hurt to try something else?" And I'm like, "Yeah, what would it hurt to try something else?"

Divinity Roxx: And then we might try it.

Eugene H. Russell IV: [inaudible] A lot better.

Divinity Roxx: Or not.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Or not. But we tried it.

Divinity Roxx: We tried it.

Eugene H. Russell IV: And you see me in the room sometimes. I tell people, I always preface stuff as we're working. I'd always say, "This may be a horrible idea, but just humor me."

Divinity Roxx: Humor me.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Let's just try it.

Divinity Roxx: Let's try it.

Eugene H. Russell IV: And we could talk theory all day and we know technically a blasé blah note shouldn't go on a blasé blah cord. But I was like, "Let's see what it feels like in the room though because these are voices and people, so let's hear what the voices sound like on it." You know what I'm saying? And so, I really liked that about how we worked. You know what I'm saying? It was like, "Okay, it's good. Let's see if there's a better."

Divinity Roxx: Yeah. That's what I love about collaboration is that when you're collaborating with somebody else, they're always going to introduce ideas that you probably wouldn't think of based on their experiences, their musical experiences, their life experiences, who they are, what type of day they're having, whatever. Collaboration always introduces something new to the mix. Because I'm always going to... Sometimes, I mean, I'm always going to lean on certain techniques.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Me too [inaudible].

Divinity Roxx: I like to sing in a certain key. I like to play a certain groove.

Eugene H. Russell IV: That's our artistic voice.

Divinity Roxx: Exactly.

Eugene H. Russell IV: I do the same thing. Similarities with my vocal arrangements and blah, blah, blah. You know what I mean? But it's cool because why should we leave that at the door? You know what I mean?

Divinity Roxx: Absolutely.

Eugene H. Russell IV: But like you said though, what is your voice [inaudible]? What's my voice? It makes a new voice.

Divinity Roxx: Exactly. Exactly.

Eugene H. Russell IV: I tell people this all the time because what I'm most proud of, and I've said this before, what I'm most proud of is how you and I resolved, for lack of a better term, conflict. I wouldn't even really call it conflict.

Divinity Roxx: No, it's conflict. Human beings have conflict. It's true.

Eugene H. Russell IV: I'm really proud of how we resolved conflict. How did you feel about that part of the process for us? We could have it out.

Divinity Roxx: Yeah, we can.

Eugene H. Russell IV: We're not cussing each other out, but we could...

Divinity Roxx: Yeah, we have it out.

Eugene H. Russell IV: We have passion.

Divinity Roxx: Especially about...

Eugene H. Russell IV: You ain't going to back down, I ain't going back down.

Divinity Roxx: We're not going to back down. And we are going debate and we're going to like... Listen, this is the reason why this thing should have happened like this. Do you not feel it?

Eugene H. Russell IV: It'll be like, "Wait, listen to me."

Divinity Roxx: "You just got to listen to the idea." One of the things I did, I did this program called Next Level. It's a state department program that brings hip hop into different countries and most of these countries have experienced some type of conflict. It's like a cultural diplomacy program. And when we did that, they brought in a person who was a conflict resolution master. So, their whole life is about conflict resolution whole. They have this whole field of knowledge about conflict resolution. I was so intrigued by that because I think that some of the greatest collaborators and collaborations could have been made better if there was some sort of conflict resolution built into the system. One of the first things this guy said was, "Whenever you put human beings together, there's going to be conflict." And conflict makes people uncomfortable. But once you realize...

Eugene H. Russell IV: Because we got desires and objectives and preferences.

Divinity Roxx: Preferences. But once you realize that there's going to be conflict, half of the battle is won because you start thinking, "Okay, so when there is conflict, how do we resolve? What are some techniques we can use to resolve that?"

Eugene H. Russell IV: We're both talkers.

Divinity Roxx: We're both talkers and we both respect each other.

Eugene H. Russell IV: In a good way, communicators, I guess is what I'm saying.

Divinity Roxx: Yeah, absolutely.

Eugene H. Russell IV: We express our feelings; you know what I'm saying?

Divinity Roxx: And we both respect each other's feelings.

Eugene H. Russell IV: True.

Divinity Roxx: Especially because we're artists and we know how sensitive we are as a artist.

Eugene H. Russell IV: True.

Divinity Roxx: We're so sensitive. We have to realize that we're not attacking each other's ideas.

Eugene H. Russell IV: That's right.

Divinity Roxx: We both want the project to be amazing.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Right. And it never got personal. It was about, "Okay, we worked this idea out. Okay, bet, you good. I'm good. We good? All hearts and mind's clear? Okay, let's move."

Divinity Roxx: So, as I think about the future of The Boy Who Kissed the Sky, I want all kids all over the world to see it.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Yeah. Why, Divinity?

Divinity Roxx: Why, Divinity?

Eugene H. Russell IV: Why do you want all the kids to see it?

Divinity Roxx: I want all the kids to see it, especially kids of color, especially little Black kids, I want them to see the power of dreaming, the power of imagination, the power that we have within ourselves when sometimes our environment makes us feel powerless. We have power within ourselves to rise above our circumstances.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Yes, we do.

Divinity Roxx: And this is this play.

Eugene H. Russell IV: You got me thinking. Also, too, speaking of those babies, you know what I'm saying? They may say, "I can't afford a so-and-so. All I got is a so-and-so." What did the boy start with?

Divinity Roxx: A broom.

Eugene H. Russell IV: A broom. And used his imagination. You know what I mean? Especially in a time of us wishing there were more funding for school.

Divinity Roxx: For music in schools.

Eugene H. Russell IV: For kids to have instruments in hands and to play music, but it's like you can work with what you have to get you to those places. You know what I'm saying? You're only limited

by the limitations of your imagination. You know what I'm saying? It'll take you there. Now, we don't know which path. You know what I mean? He had a broom.

Divinity Roxx: And he became one of the greatest guitar players in the world that

Eugene H. Russell IV: I'm like you, I want kids to know that they are not limited by what they have. They are not limited by their resources, though I wish more resources for all the kids in the world.

Divinity Roxx: Absolutely.

Eugene H. Russell IV: But for those kids that have limited resources or wish they had more, don't feel like they have enough resources to dream big. You know what I mean? I want them to know there is hope. You know what I mean? Because the music isn't here. The music, you express the music through the instrument, but the music starts here.

Divinity Roxx: That bass just sits there until I pick it up.

Eugene H. Russell IV: It's a tool, it's like a hammer. Is it really a hammer until you use it?

Divinity Roxx: Speaking of hammer, those kids, they laid down the hammer when they see the show, they get up and they scream, and they stomp. Yo, I had tears in my eyes when I watched the video of the kids and their reaction to the finale, and the boy takes off in the sky and those kids, they take off in the sky too.

Eugene H. Russell IV: It was like, "yeah, we have lift off."

Divinity Roxx: Gosh, it was so good.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Yeah, I love that. And I want that for all kids. I want this to play. I'm not going to even say ultimately, one of the places I want this play to play is Broadway. I also wanted to travel overseas.

Divinity Roxx: I was thinking that.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Yeah, yeah.

Divinity Roxx: Let's go to South Africa.

Eugene H. Russell IV: For real. Companies across the world recognizing the story that's here, because I really think that we have something special and I'm glad that we were instruments for it. You know what I'm saying? But I want kids everywhere. I want us to finish everything we need for this cast recording.

Divinity Roxx: Oh, my goodness. We'll get into that. We'll get into that.

Eugene H. Russell IV: That's another thing.

Divinity Roxx: We're working it out.

Eugene H. Russell IV: In connection with the piece. But yeah, I want the piece to be done everywhere and made available to be done everywhere because I think kids and adults need it.

Divinity Roxx: Yeah, I agree. I agree.

Eugene H. Russell IV: We all need a little freedom of imagination.

Divinity Roxx: Absolutely. And I hope we get to work on another project together again.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Yeah. Listen, if I got anything to do with it...

Divinity Roxx: Hey, let's do it.

Eugene H. Russell IV: I'm going to be calling you again. "What are you you doing? Okay, cool. Let's do it." And some other stuff, right? I want us to be able to do stuff even beyond the stage. You know what I mean? Who knows? Imagining, dreaming big.

Divinity Roxx: Movies, documentaries. Ooh. Speak it.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Yeah. But yeah, this piece, I'm just really proud of the work that we put in for it. And I certainly don't think that its life ends when the show closes.

Divinity Roxx: Absolutely

Eugene H. Russell IV: When it closes here. I think it lives on for sure.

Divinity Roxx: Yeah. I think Idris wrote a beautiful play. And we got to add music to it and now it's just this incredible piece that goes and lives in the world. It's living, it's breathing.

Eugene H. Russell IV: That's right.

Divinity Roxx: It's growing and maturing and becoming something amazing.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Keep coming, getting that freedom, liberation.

Divinity Roxx: Good to see you.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Good to see you, Globe Trotter. Glad I was able to catch you for a minute. You know what I'm saying? Before you hop on a plane.

Divinity Roxx: Oh, my goodness. For real, for real. I'll be back in the A soon.

Eugene H. Russell IV: Yes, and we'll keep working.

Divinity Roxx: Yes, sir. [inaudible]. Absolutely.

Assata Amankeechi: Thank you for listening to another episode of the Alliance Theater Podcast. You can catch The Boy Who Kissed the Sky streaming now until May 2nd on Alliance Theater Anywhere and look out for ticket sales for upcoming productions. Until next time, thank you for joining us.

